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Four lives claimed in Sullivan blast

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Four people died and several were injured in Friday's explosion and fire which leveled several structures on the Sullivan square and damaged others.

The dead were identified as Mrs. Katherine Blackburn, 37, wife of Indiana State Trooper Dan Blackburn; and proprietor of the Girls Country clothing store; Wilbur Romine, 62, of Sullivan, and Gerald Jennings, 48, of Shelburn, both employees of the Ohio Valley Gas Corp., and Mrs. Teresa Bean, 28, Carlisle, co-owner of the Candle Cupboard shop. Both the candle shop and the clothing store were destroyed.

Narrowly escaping death was Hestine Spoonmore, 63, Carlisle, according to Sullivan Sheriff Bob Hiatt, who reported she was in the Sullivan Bakery, "... trapped behind the ovens," and that her clothing was on fire by the time rescuers were able to free her. They included sheriff's Deputy Ron Jones and Gary Cooper, described as a civilian volunteer, one of many who rushed to help.

Hiatt expressed profound appreciation for quick assistance from private individuals and organizations as well as emergency services from other communities aiding the work of Sullivan city police, county forces and Civil Defense volunteers.

The sheriff and a city policeman were among the first on the scene. Hiatt was about a block away when the explosion occurred. "I had just turned onto Court Street," he said, and saw the buildings "... just collapse" and then heard the explosion.

He said Mrs. Blackburn had smelled gas at her shop. Unaware of work under way in the alley behind the store, she took her daughter outside the shop, sending her to a store across the street, turned to run down toward the candle shop to warn Mrs. Bean. Her body was found near the door of the shop. She had massive injuries, but no burns. The other bodies were found in the area which had held the shop or in the alley.

Those victims suffered burns as well as other severe injuries.

Reported in critical condition Saturday at Mary Sherman Hospital in Sullivan was Charles Robbins, 58, of Sullivan, with multiple fractures and lacerations. It was noted, however, that there had been some improvement in his condition overnight.

Mrs. Spoonmore remained in the Sullivan hospital with lacerations and a fractured arm, but was listed in satisfactory condition. Also in satisfactory condition was Frances Van Sant, 50, of Terre Haute. Wayne Hall, 31, Carlisle, with fractures, was admitted and later transferred to Terre Haute.

Others released following treatment included a volunteer fireman, Bill Springer, 22, Sullivan; Ruth Brooks, 37, Sullivan; Jean Ravellette, 54, Oaktown; Cobe Heggenbottom, 18, Shelburn; Bernard King, 51, Sullivan; James Lewis, 32, Shelburn; Mark McCammon, 14, and his brother, James, 11, of Sullivan, and Rob Bogard, 42, Merom, according to Juanita Wilson, R.N., nursing supervisor at the Sullivan hospital.

Of the scene of the explosion, Sheriff Hiatt reported, "That part of the square is gone," in a shocked tone, adding that he had never seen anything quite like the sudden tragedy which wiped out four lives and the downtown corner southwest of the courthouse square.

The Beauty Shop and the Odd Fellows lodge hall were among the buildings consumed in the fire following the blast. Heavy damage was described at the Sullivan Daily Times newspaper and the Max Miller realty office. Lesser damages were reported at the bank, an appliance store and other business places.

Reports indicated the explosion may have been triggered when a backhoe operating in the alley behind the stores cut through a gas line. The gas company employees reportedly had been called to check on a suspected gas leak.

Police logged the blast at 3:11 p.m. Later, Ralph Clem, district manager of

Ohio Valley said, "We got a call. Our guys no more than got there and boom!" Most of the injured were treated for minor injuries, according to reports which noted in particular facial lacerations from flying glass. They included two newsboys who had come to pick up their papers from the Sullivan newspaper office and were on the street when the explosion occurred. "It's a miracle none of these people lost their eyes," said one state trooper.

Robbins, a city employee working on the snow removal operation in the alley, was said to have been buried up to his neck in flaming rubble. Gary Haskins, an off duty state trooper driving by, was among rescuers first reaching Robbins and helping to free him. Another trooper, Wayne Hall, reportedly carried Mrs. Spoonmore to safety on his back as she was freed by others. He was not the Wayne Hall who was injured, however, according to reports Saturday.

The fire was fought by several area units assisting Sullivan firefighters who brought the blaze under control within three hours and remained on the frigid scene to guard against a later outbreak of flames. Assisting units included those from Dugger, Linton and Farmersburg.

Services for Mrs. Blackburn are to be conducted by the Rev. Jerry Crouse 3:30 p.m. Sunday at the Farmersburg United Methodist Church. Survivors include, in addition to her husband, three daughters, Kelley, Polly and Peggy, all at home; two sisters, Mrs. Janet McMorrow, Beech Grove, and Mrs. Freda Riggins, Farmersburg; and her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Otis Jeffers, Route 1, Farmersburg.

Funeral arrangements for the other victims are pending, for Jennings at the McHugh Shelburn Chapel. He is survived by his wife, Shirley; a son, Wayne; two sisters, Mrs. Reba Chambers and Miss Neda Jennings, both of rural Shelburn; two brothers, Byrle Jennings of rural Shelburn and Denzil Jennings of Farmersburg.

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DEMOLISHED — The Sullivan Bakery was one of several business places destroyed on the southwest corner of the Sullivan Courthouse Square Friday in explosion and fire which killed four people. Adjacent offices and shops, including the Sullivan Daily Times on the far right of the photo were heavily

damaged. Firefighters braved extreme cold as well as fire and the danger of another blast, not only during the three-hour battle against the blaze, but in the night-long vigil to protect against later fire.